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AUTHOR Reyes, Donald J.
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ABSTRACT

Although the principles governing the application of positive reinforcement to classroom situations remain clear and theoretically consistent, practical problems arise during application that are not easily anticipated. This paper focuses on one practical issue: the selection of appropriate reinforcers to use in inner city high schools. The paper is based on experiences in the development of reinforcement programs in a number of high schools in an urban area. Grade related reinforcers were found to be effective in modifying student behaviors. Nontangible reinforcers were found to be as effective as tangible reinforcers. Token systems were effective; the tokens became reinforcing in and of themselves. Spontaneous social reinforcement could be the most effective system, if it is use properly. (Author/MK)

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Proposing Reinforcers for Positive Classroom Management projects & Experiments in the Inner City High School

By

Donald J. Reyes
Northern Illinois University

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There is an increasing pool of research data demonstrating that positive reinforcement can be an effective teacher-tool for optimizing classroom learning environments. For example, a review by Warshaw (1975) and studies by Arwood (1974), Brigham (1976), Hundert (1976) and Rollins (1974) all attest to the successful use of positive reinforcement in promoting a wide variety of behavioral goals. Indeed, there is a growing trend towards including units of study in postive classroom management in courses and workshops for teachers.

Nevertheless, while the principles that govern the application of positive reinforcement to classroom situations remain rather clear and theoretically consistent, the practical problems that arise during the application process are not always easy to anticipate. Thus, one can agree with Elardo (1978) that more attention needs to be given to the practical problems involved in using positive reinforcement in natural settings. This informal discussion focuses on one such practical issue; selection of appropriate reinforcers to use in inner city high schools. Perhaps these observation can provide some helpful insight for those planning positive reinforcement projects or experiments in such a setting.

These observations are based on experiences over the past four years in a number of high schools located in a large urban area. Teachers were taught the basic principles of positive classroom management and were helped to make relevant applications to their own classroom problems. These problems typically involved student responsibility, organization, motivation and so on.

Grades. While projects and episodes stipulated behavioral goals as targets and not academic goals, in some cases teachers choose to use grade related reinforcers. For example, one science teacher working in an

all-black high school was experiencing a difficult problem with materials (responsibility). Students would "forget" books and work materials and then request permission to go to their lockers or to borrow materials from their friends or from the teacher. The resulting confusion not only lost the teacher many minutes of teaching time everyday, but set the tone for the class at the level of noise and games rather than at the level of academic study and discourse.

This teacher used a grading system that allowed students to accumulate points for homework, quizzes and tests to pre-specified levels in order to attain each of the letter grades. For each marking period a student could accumulate something in the neighborhood of 600 points. To attack the materials problem then, the teacher called for a show of textbooks at the start of one class period without any previous announcement. For those few students who had books, he entered 3 points as a "bonus" to be added to their grade point accumulation. Two days later he did the same for a show of pencils and later for a show of paper. Thereafter he intermittently (about once every week or longer) called for a show of materials and awarded "bonus" points accordingly.

This episode was entirely successful. Almost overnight the problem was corrected. Because the system was begun on an intermittent basis, the expense in minutes lost on administering the system was minimal.

This episode illustrates a general observation that grade related reinforcers were found to be extremely effective in modifying the behavior of inner city high school students. Most of the students were found to be very grade conscious and responded to even low magnitude reinforcers that provided them with opportunities to improve their academic grades. Another example would be allowing students to toss out their worst homework

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or quiz grade in exchange for a certain number of points earned in a positive reinforcement system.

This runs contrary to the widly held belief that inner city adolescents are not concerned about grades. What seems to happen is that for a variety of reasons, many inner city students cannot succeed at the standard curriculum and thus, cannot attain grade reinforcers through normal channels. However, when the curriculum is individualized to fit their achievement and ability levels or when other channels to grade attainment present themselves, many of these adolescents show themselves to be very grade oriented.

It was also found that many teachers were opposed to using grade related reinforcers. They felt it was unfair to tie in academic grades with behaviors even if those behaviors were designed to improve the academic climate of the classroom. Those that did use them, however, found them to be effective.

Tangible reinforcers. One large scale experiment was conducted in a single high school using a variety of tangible reinforcers. These reinforcers were purchased with points earned thru the demonstration of behaviors related to responsibility and motivation. While the results of this experiment are reported elsewhere, (Reyes and Smith, 1978) certain observations are pertinent here.

Teachers listed and displayed a wide variety of tangible reinforcers. Included were personal items (perfume, combs, shampoo), sports items (balls, baseball mitts), small school related items (Bic pens, pencils, paper, school folders), food (hamburgers, french fries) and other miscellaneous items (pocket chess sets, radios). One observation made

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while monitoring the project closely was that students were quick to demand their "points" but were not quick to exchange them. That is, although ongoing research showed that the target behaviors were being significantly strengthened the students tended to hoard their points rather than cash them in. Some exchanges were made for small items, such as notebook paper, typing paper, writing instruments and folders, but the personal grooming items, the sports equipment, the food and the games were not at all popular. The hoarding phenomenon will be considered later.

In discussing the system with the students, it was learned that a large number of them were saving points for one of three small pocket sized calculators that were the most expensive reinforcers in our store. When informed that the odds of getting one were very small (there were 250 students in the project), they replied that they were willing to take their chances. Thus, we were in a situation where points were being accumulated and few exchanges were being made. Those tangibles that were hypothesized to be effective reinforcers were not particularly attractive.

It should be pointed out that students could only buy certificates for hamburgers and french fries. They had to cash these in at a local McDonalds restaurant from which the food was donated to the project. In another school, a teacher would spontaneously and intermittently bring donuts to class and auction them off for <u>immediate</u> eating. This proved to be an extremely popular and effective strategy.

But by and large, non-tangible reinforcers were found to be as effective as material reinforcers in these inner city high schools.

<u>Some non-tangible reinforcers</u>. At two other high schools, several

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teachers developed systematic reinforcement systems based on menus listing a wide variety of non-tangible reinforcers. Each of these reinforcers was given a point value for exchange purposes. Here again, points were earned by demonstrating target behaviors.

Teachers found that passes were not very popular. For example, nearly all of the menus included a pass to the bathroom as a low cost item. What they found was that students just quit asking to go to the bathroom. Passes to the library and various resource centers were not very popular either. These were purchased only occasionally and only when a particular student needed to finish a class project or a school assignment. Teachers did discover that they needed to specify in advance the length of time the pass entailed and the number of students who could purchase a pass at any one time.

On the other hand, students were willing to part with their points in exchange for music. On an individual basis, students bought time to use a radio and earplugs during study or supervised study time. In group reinforcement systems, that is, where class member point totals were accumulated to earn reinforcers for the entire class, music reinforcers were popular. One teacher set it up so that 500 points bought 15 minutes of music time for the class where the teacher picked the station. For 750 points the students could pick the station. Needless to say, students felt that the additional 250 points were a smart investment. Even the prospect of earning a few minutes of music was enough to bring mild pressure from students directed at the non-conforming peers to demonstrate the target behaviors.

Perhaps the most successful reinforcer of all was the positive letter home. Here students could purchase a communication from the teacher to the

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parents in which the positive contributions and behaviors of the student were outlined. Perhaps a specific example will clarify this idea. One English teacher offered three positive letters for "sale." For a low cost, students could purchase a form letter in which positive statements were checked. These statements described behaviors and not academic performance. An example might be, "George asks intelligent questions," or "Maria is a responsible student and is a positive influence on her friends." For a higher price, the teacher would type a personal note, in Spanish or English, describing the positive contributions of the student and send it to the adult of the student's choice. For the top price, students could purchase a letter written in script, a hobby of the teacher, in English or Spanish, to the parent of his/her choice. These script letters were extremely popular and were in constant demand. Perhaps it can be explained in part by the basically negative tone of communication that transpires from the school in the home. In all cases where "golden letters" have been offered as a reinforcer, they have proven to be popular.

Token systems. Bogus money systems were tried in three classrooms. Each teacher developed a paper or cardboard currency. This currency took the place of the points that were used by other teachers. The currency system had the advantages of immediacy, efficiency and flexibility. Insofar as the teacher kept some money close by, he or she could reinforce a student immediately after a target behavior or an approximation occurred. In addition, these teachers eliminated the need to keep records of points earned by the students. The bogus dollars themselves acted as the markers. Concerning flexibility, the system allowed the teacher to reinforce a wide variety of desirable behaviors whether or not they had previously been

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identified as "target." Perhaps one example might clarify this point. One teacher had established a bogus money system in her classroom to reinforce coming to class on time and bringing materials. On one occasion she was called out of class for an emergency matter. When she came back to her class, she found the students were working on their assignments. She then spontaneously reinforced each working student with a couple of "bonus bucks." It goes without saying that these dollars tied into the existing system.

A problem mentioned earlier cropped up with the money systems. Students tended to hoard the money. They were extremely reluctant to exchange their "money" for listed menu items. Some students acquired huge bankrolls. They gambled with it, they even traded it among themselves in an informal market system. However, the fact that the bogus money acquired a value in itself actually strengthened the system. That is, students demonstrated the behaviors and took their money.

It is fair to conclude that the money became reinforcing in itself. This is espicially true in one class where an enterprising teacher developed a dollar system by substituting pictures of cartoon characters over the faces of the presidents pictured on regular currency of the several demoninations. The bills were very attractive and popular. To get some of the bills back, he brought in some old paperbacks and a dozen donuts to auction off. The books sold for 5-10 "dollars" while the donuts brought bids of 60-70.

Social reinforcement. One formal experiment was tried using attention praise, recognition and modeling in a systematic attempt ot increase the frequency of on-task behavior and to decrease the frequency of disruptive and off-task behavior. Teachers were coached in the use of this form of

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positive reinforcement. In-service personnel observed the teachers and specially trained students constructed pre- and post-treatment profiles of student behavior in control and experimental classes based on systematic observation. Final results were very favorable (Reyes & Smith, 1979). Indeed, spontaneous and systematic social reinforcement can be the most effective "system" of all. It requires no record keeping, is entirely flexible and can easily become a natural part of one's teaching style. One anecdote might illustrate one of the reasons why it is not used more.

The author met with one older teacher before observing her class. It was agreed that during the course of her lesson, she would reinforce four positive behaviours or approximations that came to her attention. At the end of the period, she not only had failed to reinforce anyone, but she roundly scolded a boy for punching the girl in front of him. When all this was brought to her attention after class, she looked at the ceiling for a few moments and then explained, "Gee, its hard to be positive."

Final thoughts. Educators often complain that the teacher training curriculum and in-service offerings are not "practical." Conversely, professors of education lament teachers' lack of concern with theory. However, in such projects as the development of positive classrooms, theory and practice must work together. Reinforcers can be proposed based on learnings from psychology, the sociology of places and from adolescent growth and development. But it is in actual practice that the value of these propositions are tested and where the theories are modified to meet the demands of the natural setting.

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